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ABSTRACT

A study explored how students challenged teachers in order to seek information, how often they employ certain strategies, and at what point in the semester they used certain strategies. Subjects were students in four classes with a maximum enrollment of 25 each from two southwestern universities. Half of the participants were enrolled in a hybrid speech course from a large university and half were enrolled in a basic speech course from a smaller university. Every two weeks for a semester, subjects recorded how often 35 behaviors occurred in the classroom. Results indicated that students challenged teachers to seek information regarding evaluation expectations, practical explanations, procedural rules, and power plays. Results also indicated that students employed these strategies frequently throughout the semester, and that certain types of behaviors became more apparent at certain times. (Contains 28 references.) (RS)

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Challenge Behavior in the College Classroom:

What, When, and How Often?

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Abstract

Past research has focused on conflict and power between students and teachers from elementary school through high school. This study focuses on the long neglected area of the college environment and treats the classroom as a unique culture. The construct of challenge behavior is explored as information seeking strategies in order to reduce uncertainty. The nature of this construct is examined by asking how students challenge teachers in order to seek information, how often do they employ certain strategies, and at what point in the semester do they use these strategies. Through an inductive process, it was determined that students challenge teachers in order to seek information regarding evaluation expectations, practical explanations, procedural rules, and power plays. It was also determined that students employ these strategies frequently throughout the semester, and that certain types of behaviors become more apparent at certain times. After providing a description of the results, this essay offers suggestions for teachers and future research.

"There is difference between knowing and teaching, and that difference is communication in the classroom" (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978, p. 3). Instructional communication scholars regard the classroom as a rich, complex communication process. Cooper (1991) defines classroom communication as "verbal and nonverbal transactions between teacher and students and between or among students" (p. 2). This transactional process is "complex, symbolic, and has both a content and a relational component" (p. 3). It is the relational component that is the focus of the present work. According to Cooper, "the relationships we create with our students affect us, our students, and the educational outcomes of our instruction" (p. 7).

The present study is an attempt to describe the nature of challenge behavior in the college classroom. It is our philosophy that before a phenomenon can be tested empirically, it must first be understood through description. In an attempt to explore the nature of challenge behavior, we provide the following theoretical framework.

The theoretical foundation which guides the current research posits four assumptions which describe our conception of the nature of classroom communication.

The first assumption proposes that the classroom inherently involves a socialization process. This process is secondary socialization whereby already socialized individuals are inducted into new sectors of society. Secondary socialization involves learning knowledge relevant to a particular role (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 130). Thus, as teachers and students change classes, they undergo secondary socialization repeatedly. This socialization premise view communication as transactional, socialization as dialectical, and human society as symbolic interaction (Staton, 1990, p. 46). That is, through communication, students are active agents in establishing, maintaining, and changing the conventions of the classroom as a culture (Littlejohn, 1989).

Our second assumption logically follows from the socialization premise and treats the classroom as a unique culture. When students and teachers come together for the first time, the teacher is the only one who knows, in advance, what the expectations of that particular classroom are; thus "classrooms are communicative environments with teachers as the only native" (Friedrich, 1987, p. 5). The students must then "identify environmental demands, and speculate about the mediational strategies necessary to meet these demands successfully" (Doyle, 1975, p. 176). Because students have a vested interest in the outcome of

the class, they attempt to share ownership of the culture. And as "teachers and students learn the new roles and begin to establish new relationships, the internalization of learning community norms will bring conflict" (Book and Putnam, 1992, p.). If performance expectations, roles, and norms are not clearly defined by the community, ambiguity will lead to uncertainty.

Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory provides the premise for our third assumption. Uncertainty, in this sense, refers to the lack of predictability of the classroom as a culture. When teachers and students meet, the primary concern of students is one of the uncertainty about the rules, norms, and expectations of the classroom. Students will, therefore, need to attempt to gain information about expectations. Students reduce their uncertainty by using different types of information-gaining strategies. They can observe the culture to determine expectations, ask questions, or test the rules or norms in the form of a challenge. These tests can lead to conflict which will help define the relational component of the classroom climate.

The nature of the resulting conflicts provides the basis of our fourth assumption. Conflict in the classroom can be either destructive or productive depending on how the parties handle the resulting challenge (Hocker, 1986).

Unproductive conflicts are characterized by participants' (teacher or student) loss of self-esteem, credibility, composure, trust, or desired information (p. 75). Productive conflicts solve immediate problems while at the same time enhancing the interpersonal relationship of the teacher and student.

Based on the framework just outlined, this study examines student the challenge behavior in the classroom that is motivated by an attempt to reduce uncertainty about the expectations of the classroom culture.

Review of Literature

Although little work has been done that deals directly with challenging or inappropriate behavior in the college classroom, extensive work has dealt with conflict and power between students and teachers at other educational levels. This study will focus on the long neglected area of the college environment.

Barraclough and Stewart (1992) define power as "the potential or capacity to influence the behavior of some other person or persons. Compliance gaining, or behavior alteration, is the realization of that potential" (p. 4). McCroskey and Richmond (1983) posit that "use of power is an inherent part of the teaching process" (p. 178).

When dealing with power and communication, it is important to note that

power is a perception. A student grants the teacher power over him/her. Power cannot be exerted by a teacher if it is not perceived by the student (Richmond, & Roach, 1992).

According to Burroughs, Kearney, and Plax (1989), "College teaching is misperceived as easy simply because we do not have the discipline problems other teachers have to deal with at lower grade levels" (p. 214). Adult learners do, however, have numerous methods of attempting to control the classroom. Power in the classroom and teacher efforts to control student behavior have been researched in a series of studies (Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1984, 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; McCroskey, Richmond, Plax, & Kearney, 1985; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond,1986; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, & Plax, 1987). Absent from these studies is an examination of the college classroom and the communication behaviors that occur between the teacher and student when challenge behavior exists.

The college classroom is a very complex place for negotiation where great sensitivity may be required to deal with teacher/student conflicts (Burroughs, Kearney, & Plax, 1989). Research on discipline in the college classroom can be used to help teachers acquire knowledge which they will need to become effective

classroom managers (Lasley, 1981).

There is an identifiable power hierarchy and social structure in the college classroom of professors, teaching assistants, and students (Civikly, 1986). The school environment can be viewed as a secondary socialization context for students (Staton, 1990). Learners are actively involved in the socialization process as they engage in the definition of their roles as students (Jamieson, & Thomas, 1974; Staton, 1990). Communication is the fundamental process through which students create shared understanding with teachers in the classroom environment. Students, through communication, exhibit challenging behavior in order to learn the expectations of the teacher and to make their expectations known (Staton, 1990).

Every time a college student enters a class for the first time, s/he must go through the process of socialization in a new culture, thus experiencing uncertainty. It is important to examine the ways in which students challenge this environment in order to reduce uncertainty (Staton, 1990). If they don't observe or ask questions, they may choose to challenge the teacher in order to find out about the expectations of the culture of the classroom. The students may ask themselves, "What will happen if . . .?" In other words, if I don't know what the

expectations of the classroom are, what are the consequences of my actions if I violate an implicit expectation? In turn, if the teacher treats this information seeking strategy as a direct challenge, negative conflict may be the result.

According to Hocker and Wilmot (1991), "Conflict is an express struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals" (p. 12). Conflict is often viewed as being solely negative. Conflict can, however, be positive in the classroom when it prompts the teacher and student to alter behavior in such a manner that the learning environment is enhanced (Hocker, 1986; Jamieson, & Thomas, 1974; Johnson, & Johnson, 1985; Kreidler, 1984; Powell, 1990; Williams, & Winkworth, 1974). According to Hocker (1986), "The goals of any productive conflict are to solve the immediate problem represented in the conflict and to enhance the interpersonal relationship to the extent that such is needed to continue working together. If the problem is solved, but the relationship worsens, the conflict is not settled" (p. 74). The difference between conflict and challenge behavior, then, is that conflict deals with an express struggle between incompatible goals, whereas challenge behavior is an information seeking strategy in order to reduce uncertainty. Challenge behavior,

if not explored as such, can lead to conflict which, in turn, can be productive or destructive.

Before we can test whether challenge behavior is primarily motivated by uncertainty reduction, we must first understand the dynamic of what is taking place in the classroom. This present study is an attempt to do just that. The purpose of this study is to describe the nature of challenge behavior in the classroom by asking three research questions:

1. How do students challenge teachers in order to seek information?
2. How often do they employ certain strategies?
3. At what point in the semester do they use these strategies?

METHOD

Sample

Four classes with a maximum enrollment of 25 each from two southwestern universities participated in the study. Half the participants were enrolled in a hybrid speech course from a large university and half were enrolled in a basic speech course from a smaller university.

Procedures

In order to create an instrument that would address our research questions,

we followed an inductive process involving several phases. In phase one, sixty open-ended critical incident surveys were given to communication professors and graduate teaching assistants at the two universities. After reading examples of critical incidents of challenge behavior, the respondents were asked to write critical incidents they had experienced.

Fifteen surveys were completed for a return rate of 25%. In all, a total of 46 critical incidents were generated by the respondents.

In phase two, these brief narratives were read by all the researchers, and one card was written for each incident containing a brief, non-biased, general description of the challenge behavior.

The cards were then grouped into five categories as follows: (a) inappropriate behavior, (b) evaluation, (c) rules, procedures, and norms, (d) relevancy, and (e) power play. These groupings were a first attempt to content-analyze the critical incidents and create exhaustive and mutually-exclusive categories (Holsti, 1969; Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989; Krippendorff, 1980).

Each researcher then attempted to place the 46 cards into the five categories. Ten disagreements were recorded for an initial intercoder reliability of 78%. (Holsti's 1968 formula for computing reliability, as cited in Kaid &

Wordsworth, 1989).

Two volunteer graduate student coders who were blind to the purpose of the study were then trained to code the cards using the initial grouping. After the first coder completed the task, it became apparent that the five categories overlapped somewhat and needed to be collapsed to four. This was accomplished by eliminating the category for inappropriate behavior.

The remaining categories are defined as follows: (a) evaluation challenges occur when students question the nature of testing procedures or grades received, (b) procedural challenges occur when students test the rules and norms, whether implicit or explicit, in the classroom, (c) practicality challenges occur when students question the relevance of the course or certain tasks, and (d) power play challenges occur when students try to influence the behavior of the teacher or other students in the class.

After refining the initial category scheme, both volunteer coders then coded the 46 cards separately. Their intercoder reliability was 97%, using the same reliability formula.

Instrument

A critical incidents frequency report (CIFR) was then compiled based on

the open-ended responses. The instrument (CIFR) contained 35 behaviors that could be sub-grouped into four major categories: evaluation, procedures, practicality, and power. Students and teachers were asked to record how often the behaviors occurred in their classroom based on a 5-point Likert-type scale (Littlejohn, 1991). The instrument was administered every two weeks in order to create a time series design intended to capture any developmental stages or changes in behavior over the length of the semester being studied. It was decided to alternate the administration of the instrument between the two universities. That is, students from the smaller university and public speaking course completed the instrument after weeks two, six, ten, and fourteen. Students from the larger university and hybrid course completed the instrument after weeks four, eight, and twelve. This was done in concern that if students completed the instrument too often they might become sensitive to the instrument and the purpose of the study. Also, we wanted to determine if there were any differences between the two schools and courses.

Statistical Analysis

The data reported in this study will be descriptive and was compiled on a spreadsheet. Each behavior reported by students was assigned a frequency score

ranging from very often (4) to never (0). The mean score for overall challenge behavior was calculated by dividing the total behavior frequency by the number of students participating for the data set. The percentage score for types of challenge behavior were weighted according to the number of behaviors within each type of challenge behavior: evaluation, practicality, procedure, and power.

Results

For purposes of clarity, the results of our descriptive data will be reported according to the data sets as divided by weeks. Within each data set the following descriptions will be provided: overall mean score of challenge behavior, percentages of types of challenge behavior, and high total frequencies of specific challenge behaviors.

Week 2

The total mean score for perceived challenge behavior in the second week of school was 13.93. Evaluation challenges accounted for 16% of the variance shared by practicality with 24%, procedure with 38%, and power with 20% of the overall variance. The specific challenge behaviors with highest overall frequencies included: comes to class late (tardy), talks during class, does not want to participate, and questions importance of subject matter, respectively.

Week 4

The fourth week of school revealed a total mean score of 32.95. Evaluation challenges accounted for 29% of the total score; whereas, practicality challenges received 26%, procedure challenges received 26%, and power plays received 19%. The following behaviors comprised the high total frequencies: talks, compares presentation scores, tardy, will not participate, questions subject matter, wants full credit on late work, and questions grade on assignment.

Week 6

The total mean score for week six was 30.17. Evaluation challenges shared 25% of the variance with practicalities 22%, procedures 32%, and powers 17%. The behaviors which occurred most frequently were tardy, absent excessively, compares scores, talks, disagrees with absentee policy, and questions grade on assignment.

Week 8

The total mean score of perceived challenges in week eight was 29.74. The percentage of each type of challenge behavior was evaluation (30%), practicality (28%), procedure (25%), and power (17%). Students were most often tardy, talking, comparing scores, refusing to participate, questioning subject

matter, arguing over test questions, questioning grades on assignment, and attempting to control when a task will be done.

Week 10

After the tenth week into the semester, students reported a total mean score of 34.50. Evaluation challenges comprised 31%, practicality challenges (19%), procedure (29%), and power (16%). The behaviors occurring most often were tardy, talks, compares scores, complains about an essay test, frequent absences, questions fairness of grading, and questions grade on assignment.

Week 12

The total mean score for challenge behavior in week 12 was 28.92. The percentage of the types of challenge behavior included evaluation (28%), practicality (25%), procedure (28%), and power (17%). High frequency behaviors included tardy, compares scores, refuses to participate, talks, and complains about a quiz.

Week 14

The total mean score of challenge behavior after the fourteenth week of school was 34.23. Evaluation challenges accounted for 28% of the variance while practicality challenges shared 19% with procedures 32% and power plays 16%.

The most frequently occurring behaviors were tardy, begs for higher grade, frequent absences, talks, absent yet makes good grades, and complains about essay test.

Discussion

This study was an attempt to lay the conceptual framework for the nature of challenge behavior in the college classroom. In doing so, we provide some descriptive data on how students challenge teachers, when they challenge, and how often these challenges occur.

In an attempt to answer the questions posed in this study, we first derived a taxonomy of the types of behavioral challenges occurring in the college communication classroom. This taxonomy was developed through an inductive process and reliability of the taxonomy was established through rigorous content analysis procedures. It was determined that students challenge teachers in order to seek information regarding evaluation expectations, practical explanations, procedural rules, and power plays. For example, a student might choose to challenge the tardiness procedure in an attempt to find out "What will happen if . . ." In other words, they might simply want to know how the teacher will respond to their challenge.

It was also determined that students employ these information seeking strategies frequently throughout the semester, and that certain types of behaviors become more apparent at some points in the semester than at others. The following discussion will trace specifically the nature of these trends, provide suggestions for college instructors in light of our findings, and suggest some possible avenues for future research.

Summary and Trends

The total mean scores reported in the results section of this paper indicate a relatively low level of perceived challenge behavior in the second week of school. Weeks four through fourteen indicate an increase in challenge behavior, however, this increase fluctuates from one data set to the next. The second week indicates a high level of perceived procedural challenges which stands to reason since the rules and norms of the class are being introduced to the student at this time. Students may challenge these rules to determine the instructors intent to follow through with certain policies. Evaluation challenges do not emerge until week four as students are just beginning the assessment phase of the course.

Practicality and procedural challenges fluctuate back and forth from each data set which indicates an emerging trend distinguishing the public speaking

course from the hybrid or survey course. The public speaking course from a, smaller university, had more procedural challenges whereas the hybrid course, from a larger university, had more practicality challenges. The nature of these two courses might explain this trend; thus an examination of the syllabi from each course ensued. The hybrid course syllabi contained, in great detail, rules of academic misconduct. The tolerance level of academic misconduct as far as procedural violations are concerned is very low at the larger university. Thus, the procedural challenges at the smaller university were more frequent than the challenges at the larger university. Another distinguishing difference between the two courses was in the area of practicality. Because the hybrid had a wider range of activities or tasks as opposed to the narrow focus of the public speaking course, practicality challenges were more frequent. The public speaking course had one main goal, purpose, and rationale for meeting the objective of extemporaneous speaking. The hybrid course covered many areas of communication including theory, interpersonal, small group, interviewing, and sales presentations. Each of these areas require additional rationalizations. Practicality seemed to increase following an assignment change or the introduction of a new task such as interviewing. Overall, the public speaking course had more perceived challenges.

This might also be explained by the nature of the narrow focus of this course. Most of class time is spent presenting and listening to speeches which might contribute to the students loss of interest later in the semester. Students in the public speaking course reported more instances of being tardy and talking in class.

The power challenges in both courses remained low and relatively unchanged throughout the semester. When students reported power challenges, they usually came in the form of refusing to participate while trying to influence others not to participate.

While the emerging trend of the differences between the two courses may indicate a lack of generalization in this study with regard to frequencies, we feel that the theoretical foundation explains this limitation. It was noted earlier that the classroom is a unique culture comprised of the teacher as the only native and the students as members. The nature of the tasks, the make-up of the students, and the personality of the teacher will all influence the behaviors of the people in that particular culture. Challenge behavior will either increase or decrease depending on how the parties in that culture handle the situations as they occur. Let it be noted that the lack of generalization deals only with frequency, not with the types of challenge behavior occurring in the college communication

classroom. We feel that our taxonomy is supported through the inductive process previously described and the high reliabilities that were reported in that process.

Suggestions for Instructors

Because each class is a unique culture, instructors should determine the nature of challenge behavior in each class they teach. They can do this by completing the critical incidents frequency report for each class in order to determine any necessary changes or accommodations for a particular group of students. Teachers can also adapt the instrument to reflect challenge behaviors that may have been observed from past experience but were not included in the original instrument. Remember the objective is to identify the challenge behaviors so that we can determine what information the students need. With that in mind, challenge behavior can be distinguished from conflict in the classroom. A major motivating factor for challenge behavior is seen as an information seeking strategy in order to reduce uncertainty about evaluation expectations, practicality explanations, procedural rules, and power plays. Students are attempting to find out "What will happen if" they behave a certain way. How will the teacher respond to the challenge? One advantage of viewing challenge behavior in this way is that instructors can focus on strategies of reducing

uncertainty rather than get caught up in the emotional outbursts sometimes involved in classroom conflict. The objective then is to determine what information to provide students in each of the challenge areas.

First, instructors might prevent evaluation challenges by providing a rationale for evaluation procedures prior to assessing students. Instructors should make their expectations clear by providing specific criteria for each assessment. When returning an exam, provide descriptive statistics so that students may understand the reliability and validity of testing procedures. Instructors should always remember to "create a need to know" when introducing a new subject or task to students in order to reduce practicality challenges. Provide a clear purpose for the objectives of the course in the syllabus, and provide justification for each particular assignment. Try to transfer principles to real life situations and explain how each task can benefit students in other areas of study. To prevent procedural challenges, instructors should include detailed information about rules, norms, and consequences for violations in the course syllabus. Refer to this study for an initial report of high frequency totals for procedural challenges, but observe each class for unique cultural differences. And finally, beware of power challenges. These are the least occurring challenges but, perhaps, the most damaging if not

handled immediately. The result of how these challenges are handled will probably affect future situations. One thing instructors might consider is that they can encourage student participation by modeling enthusiasm, concern and interest in both the students and the tasks at hand.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study was an initial attempt to describe and define the construct of challenge behavior in the college communication classroom. More work needs to be done to elaborate on and test the descriptive nature of the present work. To what extent is uncertainty reduction the motivating factor to challenge behavior? Are there other major motivating factors? And, if so, what are they? Do the types of challenge behavior (evaluation, practicality, procedure, and power) transfer over to other disciplines, age levels, and cultures? Also, the power play challenge needs further exploration. Why do they occur, and what is the result of various responses to these types of challenges? Further studies should explore the response styles to all types of challenges in order to determine the best way to handle challenge behavior in the classroom.

This study has some limitations in that it is sometimes difficult to distinquish the difference between a student's behavior that is motivated by an

incompatible goal (conflict) or an information seeking strategy. Until a teacher can understand a student's motivation for certain behaviors, it is difficult to make decisions regarding how to respond to that behavior. It is hoped that this present study sheds some light on an alternative explanation for the motivation of challenges that occur in the classroom.

Another limitation relates to the low return rates for the critical incidents frequency reports. While this may have been of greater concern had that instrument been an attempt to generalize findings from a sample to a population, such was not the goal at hand. Rather, this study was an attempt to conceptualize and describe the nature of challenge behavior. Generalizations cannot be made until we first understand what we are exploring. Further research should attempt to test the nature of challenge behavior and make generalizations about the relationship of challenge behavior to other constructs.

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